DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 154 084 UD 018 197

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TITLE The Making of a Cowboy: A High School Group Phenomenon.
PUB DATE 6 Apr 77
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Anthropological Association (San Diego, California, April 6, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Group Activities; *Group Behavior; Literature Reviews; Parent Influence; *Peer Groups; *Senior High Schools; Student Characteristics; *Student Subcultures; *Vocational Agriculture
IDENTIFIERS *California (San Joaquin Valley)

ABSTRACT

A study focusing on the development and maintenance of peer groups was undertaken at South High School in the San Joaquin Valley (California). The central purpose of the study was to determine if a school culture existed at this school. Ethnographic and field observation methods were employed to examine the phenomenon of the "cowboys," a group of approximately 40 agricultural students who are identified (by themselves and by counselors, teachers and other students) as a collective. The influence of parental and peer pressure in the making of cowboys (and cowgirls) was examined. The degree to which school culture supports or discourages the existence of the cowboys as a group was also explored. Distinguishing characteristics and activities of the group are described. Literature on adolescent peer groups and school subcultures is related to the findings of this study. It is suggested that future study of small school groups and their ingroup behavior would be more productive than the continuing focus upon school and adolescent subcultures and contracultures. (GC)

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THE MAKING OF A COWBOY: A HIGH SCHOOL GROUP PHENOMENON

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Paper Presented at the
Annual Meeting
of the
Southwestern Anthropological Association
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UDO 18197

The Making of a Cowboy: A High School Group Phenomenon

Introduction

For at least three decades, several writers have argued that much of the friction between youth and adults can be attributed to the development of attitudes and values that are different from each other. Eisenstadt (1960) has suggested that young adults shift from particularism to universalism and from ascriptive to achievement as they progress in role requirements from young adults to adults. Eisenstadt argues that primitive societies are similarly characterized and is a cause for confusion in these societies. He argues further that the adolescent peer group emerges from the tension created by the role transition and, in fact, that this is the connection "interlinking sphere" between childhood and adulthood. He argues further that as a consequence of this transition and peer pressure, the family loses some of its capacity to satisfy the adolescents' needs and as a result the peer group begins to take on an added degree of influence.

Parsons (1964) focused on the rebellious attitudes of the peer groups. Parsons, like Eisenstadt, accepted the notions of transition from particularistic to universalistic and from ascriptive to an achievement oriented adult world. He argued, however, that the youth culture and corresponding peer pressure was a psychological outlet for tension through rebellious behavior.

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1967; 1970) in comparing adolescent children in the U.S.A. and Russia, concluded that when children are left unsupervised, one could expect the emergence of nonconventional groups. These groups,

he contended, would be nonconventional with respect to adult values and norms.

James Coleman (1957) also argues in a similar vein. Coleman proposed that the reason for the development of a youth culture was a rapid rate of social and economic specialization. He contended that the existing youth culture that emerged in our society as one which emphasized cars, sports, popularity and de-emphasizes academic pursuits.

Bennett Berger argues the position taken by Coleman by observing that "the values and interests of adolescents revealed by Coleman's data seem to be derived from and shared by the great majority of their parents" (1963). Berger does admit that boys do spend a considerable amount of time on cars, sports, and exhibiting their physical prowess; girls are more interested in glamour and attractiveness as Coleman suggested earlier.

Schwartz and Merton (1967) also argue that youth culture can be traced to the problems of socialization in industrial societies. Youth culture (or contraculture as they also suggest) "consists of those adolescent norms, standards, and values which are discussed in a language particularly intelligible to members of this age-group." According to Schwartz and Merton, youth culture is a genuinely independent subculture which can be identified by the expressive symbols that the adolescent group uses in its speech (1968). Similarly, in describing the Kibbutz in Israel, Medford Spiro often refers to the culture of Kibbutz as an entity in itself.

The Problem

Thus, the results of previous studies indicate a lack of unanimity on the existence of a "youth culture" or an "adolescent subculture." While the references mentioned above are but a few that address this question, they are somewhat typical of the arguments posited with respect to the question on the

existence of an adolescent subculture. It is these arguments that have stimulated this research with the "Cowboys."

The cowboys at South High are a group of students that have mutual interest and have been identified as members of a collectivity by the students at school. It was the purpose of this investigation to determine if a school subculture did exist at South High. This problem in turn generated the following hypotheses. It was hypothesized that:

H_1: Parental pressure would be negligible when compared to peer pressure in the making of a cowboy;

H_2: Cowboys exert pressure on their members in order to maintain their number;

H_3: School culture, if it existed, would tend to support the cowboys in the making of cowboys.

Methods and Procedures

Ethnographic methods were employed in this investigation. These methods included the collection of demographic data from the school, the school district and the community. Field observation methods were also employed and they included formal and nonscheduled interviews and observations. These interviews and observations were made of cowboys (including cowgirls), teachers, and counselors. Formal interviews were held on the school campus as were the observations. A few contacts were made with parents of some of the cowboys in their respective homes.

The procedures included getting permission from the local school authorities to conduct the study. The classroom teachers, where concentrations of cowboys were known to be found, were also contacted and permission was granted to talk with the cowboys during class time. Some interviews were held in an

office; others were held outside the classroom building. Observations of cowboys behavior were made at various times under varying circumstances; some of these will be mentioned later.

South High - Site Description

South High is an urban high school located in the Southern San Joaquin Valley in California. The South High student body consists of 1896 students, both male and female, and about 87 faculty members. Less than one fourth of the instructional staff lives within the South High boundaries. The school has eight counselors, six administrators, and one security officer. The ethnic composition of the school is about 77% White, 13% Chicano, 12% Black, and 2% Other. The South High campus was opened in 1957 on a forty acre site. The facilities include gymnasiums, a football stadium, three baseball diamonds, a library, an Audio-Visual center, and outdoor basketball and handball courts. South High viewed in terms of its facilities is a typical high school that could be found almost anywhere in the state.

The Cowboys

The cowboys at South High are a group of students ranging in age from 14 to 18 years of age. They can be easily identified because they are all enrolled as agricultural students. Enrollment in agricultural classes is open to all students and is not limited to males; females can also enroll in agricultural classes. The classes include Beginning Animal Science, Advanced Animal Science, Agricultural Economics, Plant and Soil Science, Botany, Plant Taxonomy, Landscape Maintenance, and Field Experience.

Figure 1. (Place photograph here)

Cowboys-cowgirls can also be identified by their dress which includes levi pants, cowboy boots, cowboy shirts, and large belt buckles. Some cowboys are known to wear $150 Justin boots and $50 Stetson hats. Cowboys-cowgirls attend similar classes and dress in cowboy attire. At South High there are approximately 24 cowboys and about 15 cowgirls. Included in this group are 3 Chicano cowboys and 1 Chicana cowgirl. While there are approximately 20 Blacks (14 males and 6 females) enrolled in the agricultural program at South High, they are not referred to as cowboys or cowgirls. The White-Anglo cowboys are the ones who determine who shall be called a cowboy or a cowgirl. Their criteria for the use of the term will be discussed later.

> Cowboy classroom behavior is unique in several respects: In one class, when the bell rang at 12:14 (the start of 2nd lunch period) the class did not start until some of the latecomers arrived with their cokes, burritos, suckers, or Coppenhagen in hand. About fifteen minutes later, the class was ready to begin. With all the student movement, shuffling of feet and whispering, only a few students could have been listening to the instructor. During the course of the opening remarks by the instructor, some male students were seen disposing of their "chew" (Coppenhagen, Happy Days, or Skoal) into Pepsi cups. On occasion, it is not uncommon to step in a pool of "amber mess" while moving around the classroom. (Field Notes, 1977)

The classroom situation described above was an extreme situation not generally found nor accepted by the instructor. When such occurrences do occur, the instructor corrects that behavior quickly. Outside the classroom, the cowboys have a "tree" under which they group daily, especially during the lunch period. On occasion, cowboys can be seen under the tree (a tall Italian Stone Pine Tree) during regularly scheduled classes. They "cut" class by employing a variety of excuses in order to get a "chew" of Coppenhagen, Skoal, or Happy Days. Tobacco is not permitted on the school grounds but the cowboys still carry it with them as evidenced by the circular tin mark on their back pockets. This circular tin mark is seen as a symbol characteristic of any

cowboy.

Figure 2. (Place photograph here)

Cowboys come from different family backgrounds. Some come from wealthy farm homes while others come from barely self-supporting parents:

John - is a Junior. He lives in a neighboring town and commutes to school daily. He owns his own car that his father helped him pay for. John was granted permission to attend South High because of its agricultural program. The fact that his father is wealthy and influential in the community probably helped him in coming to South High. They have a large ranch where they raise livestock and horses. John wears expensive boots and hat on occasion. He is a leader and his peers look up to him. John is an average student.

Mary - is a Sophomore. She lives close to school and walks to school everyday. Her parents are divorced and she lives with her mother. They have a modest home. Mary is active in FFA (Future Farmers of America); she was elected president of the group this year. She wears western jeans with boots. She works at a riding stable after school which allows her to earn money and to keep her horse. She is looked upon as a cowgirl.

Many of the cowboy parents are not actually involved in cowboy related vocations. Several of the cowboys have indicated that their fathers were either truck drivers, warehousemen, or laborers on a farm. In one instance only was one of the cowboy's parents actually involved in cowboy related activities, i.e., the rodeo.

Results of the Study

This study began with a brief review of the literature. It was pointed out that after years of debate on the question of whether a school subculture actually exists, the question has not been satisfactorily resolved. It was the purpose of this investigation to determine if school subculture did exist

at South High. Similarly the following hypotheses were advanced in attempting to resolve the question:

H_1: Parental pressure was negligible when compared to peer pressure in the making of a cowboy.

It was shown that the literature generally accepts the notion that adolescence is a transition period wherein the children still accept the norms and values attributed to the parents (Coleman, 1963). The apparent rebelliousness of the young teenager has been characterized as only a passing phase (Parsons, 1964). Schwartz and Merton have gone beyond these statements to conclude that the language of the adolescents is what is truely unique about the group (Schwartz and Merton, 1967).

Our data compiled from the cowboys at South High suggest that the parents were highly influential in the making of a cowboy. This was evidenced by several cowboys that remembered being dressed in cowboy's attire by their parents early in life. Several cowboys also revealed that their parents at one time or other had worked on a ranch or farm. This apparent interest in farming, ranching, or rodeo persisted to the extent that the parents were an influencing factor on their children. Of the parents contacted, none has any bad feelings toward farming or ranching even though they themselves might have been doing something different (warehouse work or trucking). If any attitude towards farming or ranching was projected, it was positive and healthy in outlook ("It's good, healthy work, although it doesn't pay much").

Figure 3. (Place photograph here)

With respect to Hypothesis 1, our evidence indicates that parental pressure is highly significant in the making of a cowboy. Parental feelings, likes and dislikes, and values greatly influence the developing adolescent cowboy.

H_2: Cowboys exert pressure on their members in order to maintain their numbers.

With respect to peer pressure influence, the influence appeared to be manifested in a somewhat degrading way. When the cowboys were asked if they liked being called cowboys, the general reaction was, "No, it doesn't make any difference." In extended conversation with several cowboys, the following groups at South High were identified:

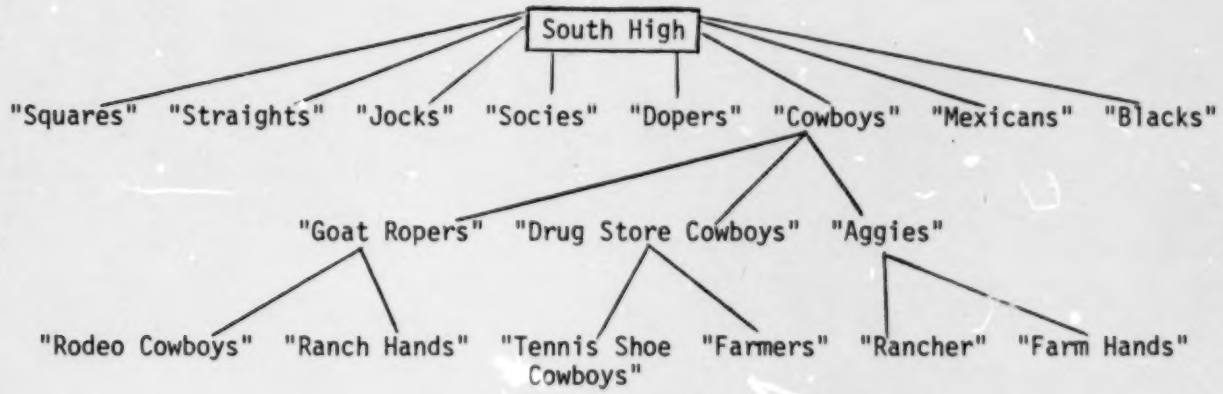

Figure 4. The Cowboys at South High

According to several cowboys, teachers, and counselors, the diagram above (Figure 4) is a fair representation of the groups found at South High. Most cowboys agreed that the school does have the groups called the Cowboys, Dopers, Jocks, Straights, and Socies. Teachers and counselors suggested the ordering of the other groups: Squares, Mexicans, and Blacks. According to them, these groups are like "isolates" that group together for mutual benefit and reinforcement.

Within the cowboy groups (consisting of about 24 cowboys and 15 cowgirls) such terms as Goat Ropers, Tennis Shoe Cowboys, Aggies, Farm Hands were readily volunteered in describing certain individuals within the cowboy group. It was only when asked for other descriptors that it became apparent that there were

several types of cowboys. Further refinements were possible when it was discovered that each subgroup could be identified by the various functions they performed. For example, only the rodeo cowboys or those who actively followed the rodeo circuit could identify the seven events in a rodeo event (Saddle Bronc Riding, Bareback Riding, Bull Riding, Team Roping, Calf Roping, Bull Dogging, and Barrel Racing). Further, only those who were intimately involved with the rodeo could identify the scoring for each event, the type rope, and handles used on the horses for the various events.

Figure 5. (Place photograph here)

Ranch Hands were identified as those cowboys who lacked complete understanding of the rodeo yet preferred to work in this area or on ranches where steers and horses could be found.

Drug Store Cowboys were identified as being of two types:

Tennis Shoe Cowboys - Those cowboys who were not really knowledgeable of the rodeo circuit ways yet dressed like cowboys and associated with cowboys.

Farmers - Those who dress like cowboys but whose understanding of agricultural farming is more acute than is their understanding of horses or the rodeo circuit.

Aggies were identified as being of two types:

Ranchers - Those cowboys whose interest is in the ownership of land for the cultivation of crops. His interest is not in horses or rodeos.

Farm Hands - Those cowboys whose interest is in working on the

farm. Their dress is like a cowboy consisting of levis, boots, and cowboy shirt.

H_3: School culture, if it existed, could tend to support the cowboys in the making of cowboys.

With respect to peer pressure, peer pressure in the making of a cowboy was found to be both negative (nonsupportive) and positive (supportive). Peer pressure was negative and lacking in influence when the school majority--the other groups in the school--degraded or "put the cowboys down." When the other school groups dominated school activities, such as in sports, school government, and other school activities, they would generally exclude the cowboys thus making it difficult for the cowboys to participate in other aspects of school life. The continued down grading, both psychologically (by verbal put down) and physically (by fist fights), tend to repudiate the argument of peer support and propping of the school subculture. The various school subgroups do not lend that much support to each other.

The only positive reinforcement that the cowboys receive in school emanates from the group itself. The cowboys are supportive of each other even if it comes in the form of subtle verbal, "Yea, he's an Aggie type." On a recent occasion during a donkey basketball game sponsored by the F.F.A. Chapter at South High, the Anglo cowboys came to the defense of the Black Aggie (cowboy) when the Black Aggie was struck by an opponent during the game. According to various sources, this never happened before.

Figure 6. (Place photograph here)

On other occasions the school administrative and instructional staff have shown their support for the cowboys. But this support has only been visible when the cowboys became active in school affairs under the aegis of

the F.F.A. Cowboys generally are tolerated as a school entity but apparently have never been fully accepted as contributing members of the school.

The diagram above (Figure 4) shows that cowboys make distinctions among themselves. That is, they readily know who is a cowboy, who is an Aggie, and who is a Drug Store Cowboy type. The membership in the respective subgroups tend to "stick together" like a clique. As a consequence of this grouping, the members of the respective subgroups can control their number in the collectivity. They can control who can join or who can be given temporary membership in the group. Similarly, there is group leadership within the respective subgroups. Cowboys can quickly point out what group others belong to and who best typifies a member of each group.

Cowboys can control who joins them in the group, but the agricultural program at South High also makes available a pool of future cowboys. Concurrent enrollment in the agricultural program at South High is not mandatory for membership with the cowboys but it facilitates the transition for the younger members coming up from feeder the junior high schools. With respect to Hypothesis 2, cowboys readily influence each other and can control the membership within their own ranks.

It has already been pointed out that other school groups, such as the "straights," "dopers," "socies," do not readily accept the cowboys. Cowboys are considered "dirty" and "without manners" by the Socies. The dopers have no use for the cowboys and consider them "far out." In almost all respects, the cowboys at South High are looked down upon by every group in school. The cowboys themselves admit that their image on campus is not a good one. Comments like: "They say we're dirty," "They always want to pick a fight" (the dopers), "They're dumb," are typical comments mentioned by cowboys as having been made to them by members of the other groups.

The cowboys at South High have been highly visible since the school opened in 1957. Several of them have attained recognition of varying forms. Cowboys are quick to note that one of their own is a stunt man in Hollywood, another is a pro in the rodeo circuit, and several others are wealthy farmers and ranchers.

The hypotheses advanced, that school culture would tend to support the cowboys, can not be supported. The evidence points to the opposite extreme: There is little if any positive support for the cowboys that is generated from the membership of the other school subgroups. If support for the cowboys is present, it is by and large negative. The support that the cowboys have at South High is either administratively dictated, teacher generated, or parental in origin.

Summary and Conclusions

The central purpose of this study was to determine if a school culture existed at South High School. In order to focus in on the question, three hypotheses were advanced. These hypotheses were directed at the cowboys at South High. The cowboys at South High were observed in an attempt to get a better understanding of a "school subculture." The evidence reported indicated that there is a lack of support for the cowboy group at South High School.

Central to the argument about the existence of a school subculture is the degree of positive support for a subgroup on the part of the larger collective called the school. The results of this study indicate that there is no intraschool group support for the cowboys. This suggests that the other school groups at South High probably experience and same lack of support from the other groups. With such a lack of unity and cohesiveness among the groups, it is difficult to comprehend the existence of a "school subculture."

This is particularly troublesome when there are varying definitions of school culture: "Those adolescent norms, standards, and values which are discussed in a language particularly intelligible to the members of this age group" Schwartz and Merton (1967). Youth culture is one which emphasizes cars, sports, popularity, and de-emphasizes academic pursuits (Coleman, 1957); Kibbutz culture (or group culture) is self supporting (Spiro, 1970).

It could be argued that school subcultures do exist and that the arguments posited for the cowboys are not sufficient verification for the dismissal of the argument. While this might be acceptable to some, I would argue that it would be more meaningful to study small school groups and their in-group behavior, such as the cowboys at South High, then there is dwelling on the possible existence of school subcultures, school contracultures, or adolescent subcultures. It is my belief that all of these terms are counterproductive to the continued development of school ethnography. A much better understanding of a school can be gained by pursuing the study of small school groups and their in-group behaviors.

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